

From groceries to motorcars, lingerie to widgets - if you look hard enough you'll probably find somewhere on the web you can order anything you need (getting it delivered may be a whole different matter, particularly if you are trying to buy a Llama from a Peruvian website). The web has become the largest shopping mall on the globe, with all the accompanying frustration! Like any large shopping center its hard to find what you want without traipsing all over the place - the directories are usually unhelpful, and all too often the shops provide little information to answer your questions sensibly!

With web shops the problems manifest themselves as poor indexing on the various web search engines making the right shop for the product you require hard to find. And when you get to a shop, the way its laid out can make it ponderous to clearly identify the item you need and to understand exactly how much it will cost you and when it can be delivered. And the product information? Well, on so many of these sites it can be so minimal or difficult to understand that it you'll end up spending hours browsing around trying to make sense of it.

As with all things web, the variation in quality of web shops is immense. A small proportion of web shops are absolute gems - easy to use, orientated for repeat customers, having clear pricing, and well thought out product information designed to make up for the shopper's inability to physically inspect what they are interested in buying. Unfortunately, like gemstones, such web shops are rare and pricey to build. More often, web shops are more akin to lumps of coal - they look a mess and leave your hands grubby if you touch them! Web shops, or eCommerce sites as they are now jargonized, live up to the old adage - 'You get what you pay for' - when it comes to having them built. That said, you don't have to think in 10's of thousands for a good web shop - that's beyond the pocket of most small businesses. But be skeptical of what you'll get for less than £500 - it may well allow your customers to shop online for your products, but don't expect them to repeat the performance!

So what makes a good web shop? In fact the answer is pretty straightforward, but comes in two parts - the products and the customer.

## Selling the Product

Your web shop should make it easy to:

- Find things!

Clearly categorize your products to make it easy for customers to locate what they need even if they can't remember the product name.

Allow products to be in multiple categories. Remember, as the trader you might regard bleach say as a toilet cleaner, whereas your customer could be trying to sort out a smelly sink and be looking for a kitchen cleaner

Make it easy to search when your customer knows what they're looking for. Let them search on manufacturer, product name, manufacturer's product code, and alike.

The golden rule for web shops is the fewer the clicks the happier the customer. When it comes to finding the product and ordering it anything you can sensibly do to aid this is a bonus.



- See what's being bought

A picture speaks a thousand words they say - but not if it takes a politician's speech length to load. Good web designers will make sure your product pictures load fast, but its up to you to make sure those pictures present the product well. If the product is a simple commodity a single shot of the standard packaging should be sufficient to cue the customer's recognition. If the product is complex then consider using a short slide show to show off all the key product features. But don't overdo it. The need for video sequences or animation in a web shop is really only necessary for very specialized products - you know, brain scanners, spacecraft re-entry vehicles, nuclear warheads, and such like!

- Choose the product

Make it clear what the product is about. Even for basic commodities think about providing information such as:

- What you use it for
- How you use it
- How much do you need
- What are the alternatives

Of course, if you're selling something like books you might need to answer slightly different questions (Who's it by, what's it about, why should I read it), but the concept is the same - give your customers what they need to know, and give them a bit extra by telling them what they might like to know

Don't just lift advertising gabble off the manufacturer. Sure its fine to reproduce the basic technical details, and consider providing a link to the manufacturer's web site if you think their site is any good (and you're willing to make sure the link is always up to date!), but think about your customers and how they think, then consider rewriting the product information appropriately.

Be consistent. Use the same structure for describing each product you are selling. There is nothing worse when browsing a web shop than finding it impossible to compare products on the same shop because of the way the products are described is different from product to product. It's usually a clear sign that the descriptions have been lifted straight from manufacturer's catalogues.

Offer comparisons if you sell multiple products for the same purpose, and give a clear table highlighting the key differences between the products to make it easy for the customer to choose between them without having to read each product's separate description.

- Order the product

Ordering should be as simple as possible

If your customer might want multiples of the same product, give them a box to enter the number required, followed by a single click on an 'Add to Order button

Where there are multiple sizes for a product available, present them as a clear table allowing ordering of any number of any combination of sizes in one order process - don't make the customer have to return to the product page to order different sizes

Where there are optional components to a product, again let the customer add these to the main product listing then order the whole as a group - don't force them to keep switching back and forth between the shopping cart and the product component details to build the order

Make it simple to review and amend what they have on order. Shopping carts should be easy to read, provide options for removing items and amending item quantities, and should clearly show subsidiary costs such as sales taxes and shipping costs.

Don't hide costs to the end. Nobody likes to spend 20 minutes ordering, only to see at the end that the prices were ex-sales tax or that shipping will be exorbitant to their location. They might complete the order this time, but you'll probably not see them again and you certainly will get bad references from them.

- Flag availability

Clearly show at all stages how long it will be for different products to be delivered, particularly of you run a lean supply chain and keep minimal stocks.

If different products ordered have different delivery lengths, consider offering an option for customers to have split delivery (at a cost naturally)

## Keeping the Customer

You can do all of the above, and make sales, but will the customer come back for more, and even better recommend your web shop to others? What gives some web shops an edge, and therefore builds customer loyalty, is their customer focus. They make the shopping experience easy. What you have read above are the basics of a good website that shouldn't cost a fortune to build. For a little bit more cost you can make sure your shop is liked as well as used! The price you put on customer satisfaction, and hence on repeat business, is reflected in your willingness to add on these extras:

- Knowing the customer

Give your customers the ability to log onto your web shop and store basic information about themselves such as shipping and billing addresses. That way they don't have to re-enter it every time they shop with you

Let your customer store often repeated orders so that they can reorder with a single button click

Provide your customer with an order parking option so that they can start an order but not have to finish it in a single ordering session

Let your customer store their preferences. Depending on what you're selling these could be colour schemes, preferred sizing, or preferred manufacturers. For example, if you're a

clothing retailer, let the customer put their clothing sizes in for each member of the family they order for.

Include the ability for the customer to select such items as preferred delivery method and payment terms

- Interacting with the customer

Offer (but don't force upon) the option of emailed or mailed product updates, newsletters, and promotions. If you do this for your non-web business why not do it for your web shop as well

Provide a form for customers to submit questions. But if you do, make sure you respond in good time. Web users expect responses in hours not days!

- Giving the customer control

Make the customers feel in control of the orders they make:

- Let them see the status of the order
- How long it will take to be ready to ship
- When it is ready to ship
- When it has shipped
- Give them access to their order history
- What's they've ordered and when
- How much they've spent

- Passing on the benefit

Having a web shop should save you money in stock levels, administration, and staffing. Consider passing on some of this saving to your web shop customers as discounts, particularly for repeat customers

Will doing all these things give you a first calls web shop? Maybe! - It will ensure your shop has the right features, but you still need to have a good web design company build it for you. They must know more than just how to use Microsoft FrontPage or Macromedia Dreamweaver. They have to know how to build effective, safe databases, understand security and information privacy, and know how to program efficient transactions. Oh, and yes, they must know how to design good looking, fast to load, easy to navigate around web pages.

### Is that it? Anything more you'll need?

Just two more things to consider. Firstly, its great to have the web shop for your customers, but make sure that the web development company provide you with an easy to use way of keeping the shop's contents up to date. Get a clear picture early on of how you're going to be able to add, delete, and update products on the web shop. What you'll need to do to incorporate new product information and pictures, and how easy it is for you to change pricing, shipping and payment details. Ask these basic questions and make sure you're happy with the answers, then ask some more, such as can you add new categories of products, how do you manage customer records, what reports can you run off, how do you incorporate mail shots to your clients, how do you combine the order

information you get from your web shop with your existing stock control and accounting systems. All too often, these back office requirements get missed or poorly put together because the web designers are more interested in the jazzy aspect of what the customer sees rather than how you'll need to manage the business the web shop generates. Again, this is where the cost comes in - paying a bit extra for your system should mean that these are all done well.

And lastly. How does the customer pay? The easiest option is to let the customer create an order then print it off and fax or post it too you. No fuss, none of the extra costs involved in taking payment online through credit or debit cards, and from the customer's perspective - no worries about the security of their card number. It works pretty well for the customer, but doesn't have the instantaneous completed sale feel that you might prefer. If you're a small business with a predominantly local customer base (which means the mail will get to you quickly - remember that most people don't have fax machines), then it's a good option. On the other hand, if you're looking to have orders from overseas or for products requiring a quick turn-around to the customer you should really go the online payment route (the full Monty of eCommerce!).